

Libya

Libya is a crossroads of history, continents and ancient empires. Home to the Mediterranean's richest store of Roman and Greek cities – Sabratha, Cyrene and, above all, Leptis Magna – each of which is overlaid by remnants of Byzantine splendour, it's a place where history comes alive through the extraordinary monuments on its shores. Every corner of cosmopolitan Tripoli resonates with a different period of history. It's where the Sahara meets the Mediterranean.

Libya is also home to Africa's most exceptional and accessible desert scenery. The Sahara engulfs over 90% of the country, offering up vast sand seas the size of small European countries. Visit the enchanting oasis towns of Ghadames and Ghat, where the caravans once showcased the riches of Africa. Marvel at palm-fringed lakes surrounded by sand dunes in the desert's heart. Be bewitched by extinct volcanoes, such as Waw al-Namus, where black sand encircles multicoloured lakes. Go deeper into the desert and experience Jebel Acacus, one of the world's finest open-air galleries of prehistoric rock art.

One important point to note is that visits to Libya can only be made as part of an organised tour. While those of you accustomed to travelling independently would probably love the chance to do so in Libya, remember that Libya is a vast country and on a tour you'll be able to cover so much more territory than you otherwise could. Remember also that organised groups can be as small as a party of one (plus guide) and with most tour companies you can design your own itinerary.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 1.8 million sq km
- **ATMs** One, but likely to be more soon
- **Borders** Tunisia (Ras Adjir) and Egypt (Amsaad) open; Algeria, Chad, Sudan and (usually) Niger closed to non-Libyans
- **Budget** US\$50 to US\$100 per day
- **Capital** Tripoli
- **Languages** Arabic, Berber
- **Money** Libyan dinar (LD); US\$1 = 1.3LD
- **Population** 5.5 million
- **Seasons** Hot (June to August), wet (March and October), dry (rest of the year)
- **Telephone** Country code ☎ 218; international access code ☎ 00
- **Time** GMT/UTC +1
- **Visa** Arranged as part of organised tour; can be picked up on arrival



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Leptis Magna** (p134) Tread softly through one of the world's best-preserved Roman cities, with exceptional bath complexes, theatres and forums in a stunning seaside location.
- **Tripoli** (p131) Lose yourself in the delightful, whitewashed medina replete with Ottoman mosques and houses and the world-class Jamahiriya Museum.
- **Ghadames** (p137) Find the oasis town of your imagination in the labyrinthine, palm-fringed old city and the most enchanting caravan post in the Sahara.
- **Jebel Acacus** (p137) 4WD through the striking mountain range which is home to the indigenous Tuareg and magnificent 12,000-year-old rock art.
- **Waw al-Namus** (p138) Marvel at the remote volcanic crater, off the beaten track in the heart of the Sahara, with black sand and red, green and blue lakes.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Libya is at its best in November and from February to April. Summer (June to September) is generally very hot with average temperatures on the coast around 30°C, often accompanied by high humidity. Don't think of going into the desert from mid-May until October, when temperatures reach a sweltering 55°C. Desert nights can drop below freezing.

ITINERARIES

- **Two Weeks** Two weeks is the minimum time required to get a real taste of the country. Tripoli (p131) deserves at least two days (preferably one at the begin-

HOW MUCH?

- **Museum admission** US\$2.40
- **Tripoli-Sebha flight** US\$30
- **Colonel Qaddafi watch** US\$4 to US\$32
- **Internet connection per hour** US\$0.80
- **4WD hire per day** US\$71

LONELY PLANET INDEX

- **1L petrol** US\$0.10
- **1L bottled water** US\$0.80
- **Bottle of (nonalcoholic) beer** US\$1.20
- **Souvenir T-shirt** US\$9
- **Shwarma** US\$0.80

ning and another at the end of your trip), with a further day each for Leptis Magna (p134) and Sabratha (p134). You can see the best of the Jebel Nafusa (p136) on a long day en route to Nalut (p136) or Ghadames (p137); you'll need at least a minimum of a good half day for the latter. Crossing to the Ubari Lakes (p137) takes a minimum of two days. Allow a few days for the Jebel Acacus (p137). Flying back to Tripoli saves a full day's journey by road.

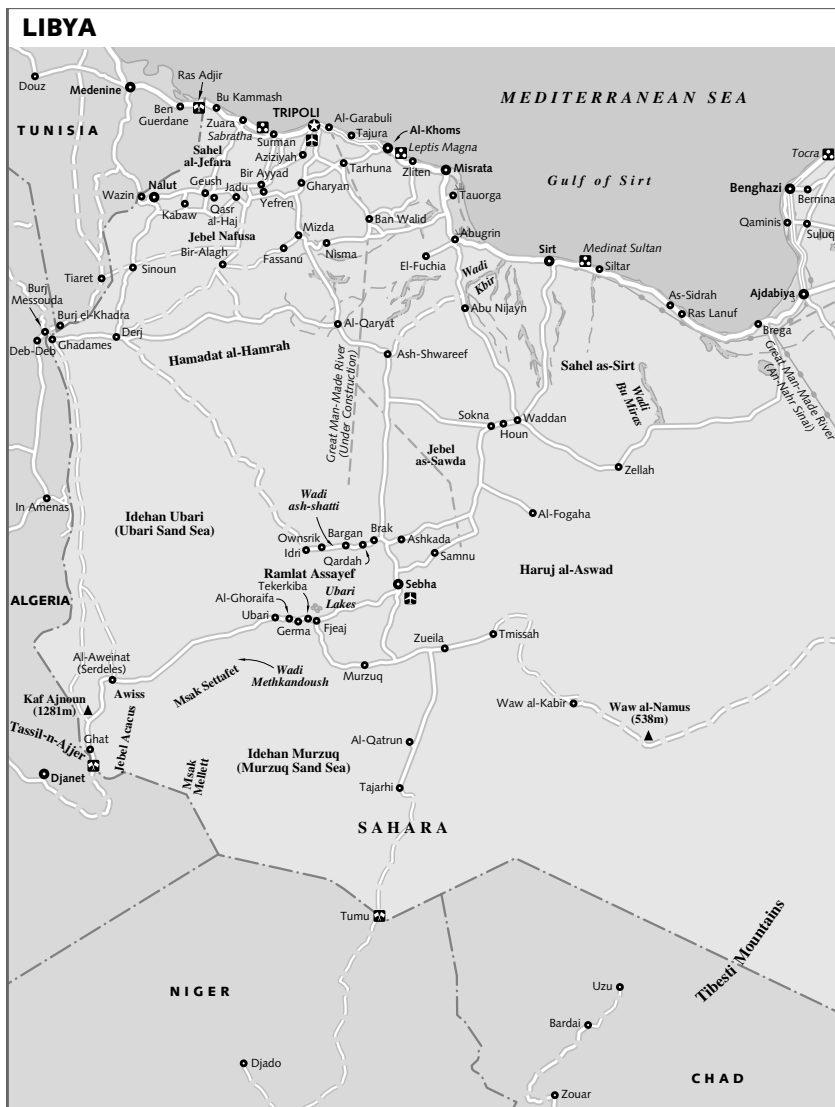
- **One Month** With a month you could see everywhere covered in this chapter. Adding Waw al-Namus (p138) and Ghat (p137) to the two-week itinerary is a must, while you could also spend more time exploring the Idehan Ubari and Jebel Acacus. A week in Cyrenaica visiting the ancient cities of

VISITING LIBYA

Since late 2000, visits to Libya have only been possible as part of organised tours and visas are only issued to those with an invitation from a Libyan tour company. The official reason for such a rule is that freewheeling European tourists were caught red-handed trying to take priceless antiquities and prehistoric rock art out of the country.

You will at all times be accompanied by a guide from the Libyan tour company who organised your visa and is responsible for you throughout your stay. Discuss your itinerary in advance with the tour operator, although most likely you will have little choice when it comes to hotels and restaurants. All your transport while in Libya will be similarly organised by the tour operator and, apart from domestic air travel, it is highly unlikely that you will travel by public transport. For this reason, we have covered sleeping, eating and transport options only in brief throughout this chapter.

For a full list of Libyan tour operators, see p141. Information on obtaining visas can be found on p140.



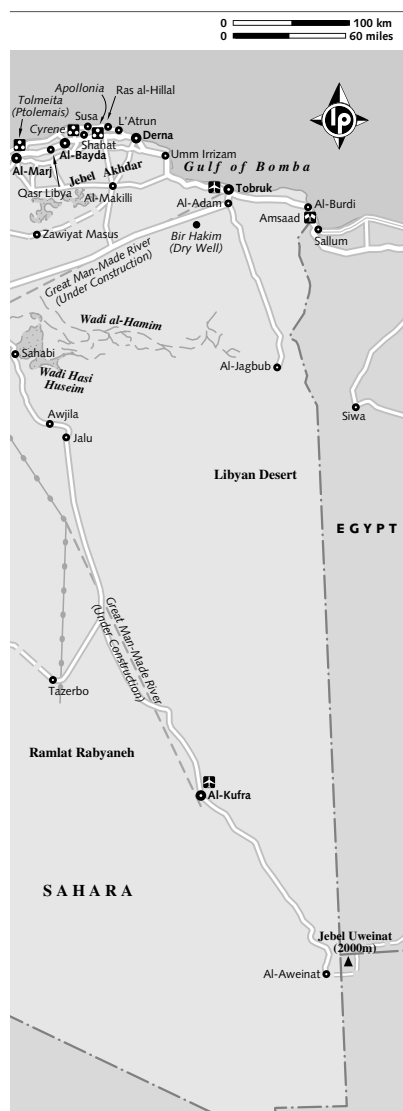
Cyrene (p135), Apollonia (p136), as well as Benghazi (p135) and Tobruk (p136) should round off your trip nicely.

HISTORY

Throughout history Libya has been blighted by its geography, lying in the path of invading empires and someone else's war.

The Great Civilisations of Antiquity

From 700 BC, Lebdah (Leptis Magna), Oea (Tripoli) and Sabratha formed some of the links in a chain of safe Phoenician (Punic) ports stretching from the Levant around to Spain. Traces of the Phoenician presence in Libya remain at Sabratha (p134) and Leptis Magna (p134).



On the advice of the Oracle of Delphi, in 631 BC Greek settlers established the city of Cyrene (p135) in the east of Libya. Within 200 years the Greeks had built four more cities of splendour as part of the Pentapolis (Five Cities), which included Apollonia (p136). But with Greek influence on the wane, the last Greek ruler, Ptolemy Apion, finally be-

queathed the region of Cyrenaica to Rome in 75 BC.

Meanwhile, the fall of the Punic capital at Carthage (in Tunisia) prompted Julius Caesar to formally annex Tripolitania in 46 BC. The Pax Romana saw Tripolitania and Cyrenaica become prosperous Roman provinces. Such was Libya's importance that a Libyan, Septimus Severus, became Rome's emperor (r AD 193–211).

Islamic Libya

In AD 643, Tripoli and Cyrenaica had fallen to the armies of Islam. From 800, the Abbasid-appointed emirs of the Aghlabid dynasty repaired Roman irrigation systems, restoring order and bringing a measure of prosperity to the region, while the mass migration of two tribes – the Bani Salim and Bani Hilal – from the Arabian Peninsula forever changed Libya's demographics. The Berber tribespeople were displaced from their traditional lands and the new settlers cemented the cultural and linguistic Arabisation of the region.

The Ottomans occupied Tripoli in 1551. The soldiers sent by the sultan to support the Ottoman pasha (governor) grew powerful and cavalry officer Ahmed Karamanli seized power in 1711. His Karamanli dynasty would last 124 years. The Ottoman Turks finally reined in their erstwhile protégés in 1835 and resumed direct control over much of Libya.

On 3 October 1911, the Italians attacked Tripoli claiming somewhat disingenuously to be liberating Libya from Ottoman rule. During almost three decades of brutal Italian rule, a quarter of Libya's population died as a result of the occupation.

With the onset of WWII, devastating fighting broke out in the area around Tobruk. By January 1943, Tripoli was in British hands and by February the last German and Italian soldiers were driven from Libya.

Qaddafi's Libya

Desperately poor Libya became independent in 1951, but the country's fortunes were transformed by the discovery of oil in 1959 at Zelten in Cyrenaica. Over the decade that followed, Libya was transformed from an economic backwater into one of the world's fastest-growing economies.

With the region in turmoil, it came as no surprise when a Revolutionary Command Council, led by a little-known but charismatic

27-year-old Mu'ammar Qaddafi, seized power in Libya on 1 September 1969. Riding on a wave of anti-imperialist anger, the new leader closed British and American military bases, expanded the armed forces and closed all newspapers, churches and political parties. Some 30,000 Italian settlers were deported.

As the colonel launched his political theories of participation for all Libyans with the Revolutionary Committees that became famous for assassinating political opponents throughout Europe, the US accused Libya of involvement in a string of terrorist attacks across Europe and on 15 April 1986, the US Navy fired missiles into Tripoli and Benghazi.

After Libyan agents were charged with the 1988 bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over the Scottish town of Lockerbie and the 1989 explosion of a French UTA airliner over the Sahara, UN sanctions came into effect. Finally, in early 1999, a deal was brokered and the suspects were handed over for trial by Scottish judges in The Hague. The sanctions, which had cost Libya over US\$30 billion in lost revenues and production capacities, were immediately lifted.

Libya Today

Libya today is like a country awakening from a nightmare. Libya's payment of compensation to victims of the Lockerbie disaster and its announcement on 19 December 2003 that it would abandon its chemical and nuclear weapons programmes, finally ended its international isolation. Suddenly, Libya was the West's best friend, held up as an example to so-called rogue states across the region.

World leaders have since flocked to Libya, the US will soon reopen its embassy in Tripoli, and Western businesspeople are clamouring for lucrative oil contracts. The Libyan government has promised far-reaching economic reforms as part of its plans to overhaul Libya's moribund economy.

CULTURE

In some ways, Libyans are everything that Colonel Qaddafi isn't – reserved, famed for tolerance and discreet. They are self-sufficient and wonderful improvisers, characteristics fostered during the long years of sanctions. Libyans are also deeply attached to their land, proud of it and even loathe to leave it, especially at such an exciting time in their history. Libyans never forget where they came from,

whether it be their home village or the dark years of isolation. Surprisingly knowledgeable about the world, they remain refreshingly untouched by it. Above all, for the first time in decades, Libyans are optimistic, convinced that the future is theirs.

Life revolves around the family, a bond that took on added significance during the years of international isolation when Libyan society turned inwards in search of company and support. Grafted onto the immediate family are multiple layers of identity, among them extended family, tribe and village, with an overarching national component of which every Libyan is proud.

Libyan women nominally have equal status with men, from marriage and divorce laws to rights of equal pay in the workplace. The reality is somewhat different from the theory, with men still the predominant players of public life and few women reaching the summit of any industry.

PEOPLE

Libya's population density (less than three per square kilometre) is one of the lowest in the world. Up to 90% of people live in urban centres, in stark contrast to Libya's pre-oil days, when less than 25% lived in cities. Libya also has an overwhelmingly youthful population, with almost half under 15 years of age.

Libya's demographic mix is remarkably homogenous – 97% are of Arab or Berber origin. Other groups include the Tuareg and Toubou, who both inhabit Libya's southern desert regions.

More than 95% of Libya's population is Sunni Muslim with most following the Maliki school of Quranic interpretation, which preaches the primacy of the Quran (as opposed to later teachings) and tolerance.

ARTS & CRAFTS

Libya's best-known writer is Ibrahim al-Kouni, whose works reveal a fascination with the desert. He has published eight volumes of short stories and a number of novels, including *The Bleeding of the Stone* and *Anubis*, which have both been translated into English. Al-Kouni may soon be eclipsed by Hisham Matar, a young novelist from an exiled Libyan family whose *In the Country of Men* took the literary world by storm in 2006.

One of the most famous traditional music forms in Libya is the celebratory *mriskaawi*,

which came from Murzuq and forms the basis for the lyrics of many Libyan songs. *Malouf*, with its origins in Andalucía, involves a large group of seated revellers singing and reciting poetry of a religious nature or about love.

Important popular singers to watch out for include Mohammed Hassan, Salmin Zarou and Ayman al-Aathar.

ENVIRONMENT

Libya is the fourth-largest country in Africa; it's twice the size of neighbouring Egypt and over half the size of the EU. Despite the fertile coastal plain of Sahel al-Jefara, and the mountains of Jebel Nafusa and Jebel Akhdar in northern Libya, 95% of the country is swallowed up by the Sahara Desert.

Apart from desert species such as gazelles, fennec foxes, wolves, snakes, scorpions and the notoriously shy waddans (large goatlike deer), Libya's once-abundant wildlife has largely been wiped out.

Colonel Qaddafi's brainchild – the Great Man-Made River, which pipes water from vast under-desert reservoirs to thirsty coastal cities – is a temporary solution for a country critically short on water and there are increasing concerns over the project's long-term environmental impact.

Other environmental concerns include Libya's near-total dependence on fossil fuels for its power needs and the rubbish that all too often litters Libya's wilderness.

FOOD & DRINK

The staple tourist diet consists of couscous and chicken in Tripolitania and the Fezzan, with rice replacing couscous in Cyrenaica. For a little variety, there are also macaroni-based dishes inspired by the Italians; vegetable stews and potatoes might be a recurring theme if you're lucky.

Tripoli, Benghazi and a few other cities have some wonderful restaurants serving dishes of great variety. Particular highlights are the seafood dishes at specialist fish restaurants in Tripoli.

Many restaurants will assume that you will have a banquet-style meal, which consists of soup, salad, a selection of meat (or fish) dishes, rice or couscous, a few vegetables and tea or coffee.

Vegetarians should always specify their requirements as soon as they arrive in the restaurant. Vegetarianism is rare in Libya,

but most restaurants are obliging and keen to make sure you don't leave hungry.

For drinks, soft drinks and bottled mineral water will be your staples, along with coffee or tea. Nonalcoholic beer is also widely available.

TRIPOLI

☎ 021 / pop 1.15 million

Set on one of North Africa's best natural harbours, Tripoli exudes a distinctive Mediterranean charm infused with a decidedly Arabic-Islamic flavour. Tripoli (Al-Tarablus in Arabic) is Libya's largest and most cosmopolitan city. Its rich mosaic of historical influences – from Roman ruins and artefacts to the Ottoman-era medina – will leave few travellers disappointed.

ORIENTATION

The city's most recognisable landmark is the castle, Al-Saraya al-Hamra, at the eastern corner of the medina alongside the central Martyrs Sq (Green Sq). All the main shopping and business streets radiate from the square.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Fergiani's Bookshop (☎ 4444873; fergi_u@hotmail.com; Sharia 1st September; ☎ 10am-2pm & 5-9pm Sat-Thu) An excellent selection of hard-to-find English-language books on Libya.

Emergency

Emergency Hospital (☎ 121) Five kilometres south of the centre.

Internet Access

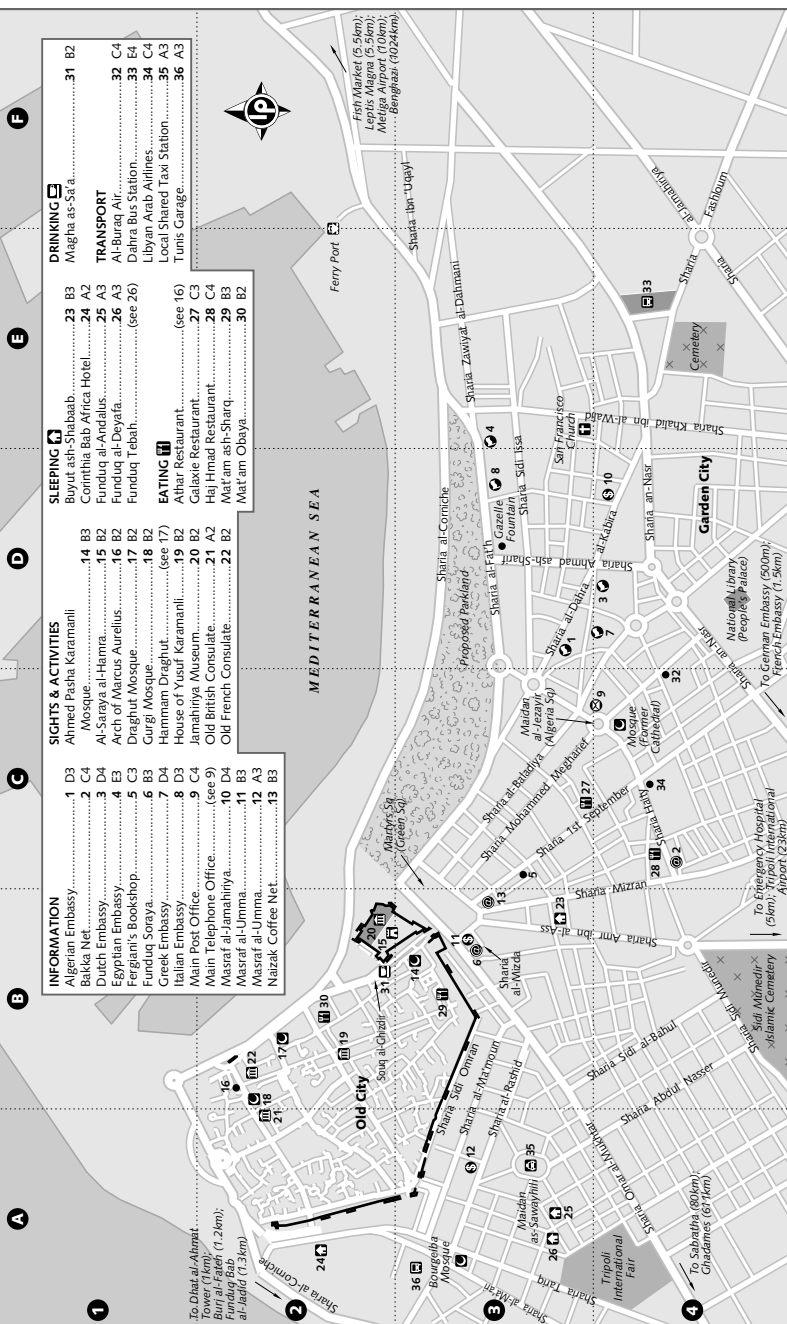
Bakka Net (cnr Sharias Mizran & Haity; per hr US\$0.80; ☎ 8.30am-midnight Sat-Thu, 5pm-midnight Fri)

Fundug al-Soraya (per hr US\$0.80; ☎ 9am-midnight Sat-Thu, 5pm-midnight Fri) Off Sharia Omar al-Mukhtar.

Money

The most easily accessible *masraf* (banks) are in the streets between Martyrs Sq and Maidan al-Jezayir (Algeria Sq). Masraf al-Tijara Watanmiya (Bank of Commerce & Development) has a branch on the ground floor of the Dhat al-Ahmat Tower 1 and on the 1st floor of the Burj al-Fateh, where you can obtain cash advances on your Visa card.

TRIPOLI



Post & Telephone

Main post & telephone office (Maidan al-Jezayir; ☎ 8am-10.30pm Sat-Thu) The telephone office, where you can make international and local calls, is on your left as you enter the main post office hall.

Travel Agencies

See p141 for a list of the tour operators and travel agencies operating out of Tripoli.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Housed in the eastern corner of the sturdy **Al-Saraya al-Hamra** (Tripoli Castle or Red Castle), the **Jamahiriyah Museum** (☎ 3330292; Martyrs Sq; adult/child US\$2.40/0.80, camera/video US\$4/8; ☎ 9am-1pm Tue-Sun) is home to one of the finest collections of classical art anywhere in the Mediterranean. The museum, developed in consultation with Unesco, provides a comprehensive overview of all periods of Libyan history and is especially strong on Roman and Greek Libya.

Tripoli's whitewashed **medina** mostly dates from the Ottoman period, although it is watched over by the **Arch of Marcus Aurelius**, the only intact remnant of the ancient Roman city of Oea and completed in AD 163 to 164. Nearby, the 19th-century **Gurgi Mosque** has one of the most beautiful interiors in the city with imported marble pillars from Italy, ceramic tilework from Tunisia and intricate stone carvings from Morocco. The 16th-century **Draghut Mosque** has elegantly rendered pillars and arches (15 in the prayer hall alone), while the **Ahmed Pasha Karamanli Mosque**, the largest mosque in the medina, has a beautiful octagonal minaret and intricate carvings around the five doorways and 30 domes.

Clustered around the north of the medina are the **Old British Consulate** (Sharia Hara Kebir;

admission US\$1.60, camera/video US\$1.60/4; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Sat-Thu), the **Old French Consulate** (Zenghet el-Fransis; admission US\$1.60, camera/video US\$1.60/4; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Sat-Thu) and the **House of Yusuf Karamanli** (admission US\$1.60, camera/video US\$1.60/4; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Sat-Thu); each is a fine example of an Ottoman mansion arrayed around an interior courtyard.

For a traditional *hammam* (bathhouse) experience, try **Hammam Draghut** (Draghut Mosque; steam bath US\$0.80, massage US\$1.60; ☎ women 7am-5pm Mon, Wed & Thu, men 7am-5pm Tue, Sat & Sun).

SLEEPING

As travel to Libya is only possible as part of an organised tour, you're unlikely to have much choice when it comes to accommodation. If you do get a chance to choose, the following places are recommended.

Buyut ash-Shabaab (Central Youth Hostel; ☎ 4445171; fax 3330118; Sharia Amr ibn al-Ass; dm Hl nonmembers/members US\$3.20/4.80) This hostel is a pretty basic place, but the location is ideal and the shared bathrooms are fine.

Funduq Bab al-Jadid (☎ 3350670; fax 3350670; Sharia al-Corniche; s/d US\$24/32; ☎) With a good seafront location, this popular place is outstanding. It has small but spotless, well-appointed rooms.

Funduq al-Deyafa (☎ 4448182; diafatip@hotmail.com; Sharia al-Raza; s/d US\$32/39; ☎) A good choice in the area, Funduq al-Deyafa is as friendly as Funduq al-Andalus, although the rooms lack character.

Funduq Tebah (☎ 3333575; www.tebah-ly.com; Sharia al-Raza; s/d US\$32/39; ☎) Similarly impressive, this place has very tidy rooms with exactly the kind of attention to detail that government hotels lack.

Funduq al-Andalus (☎ 3343777; www.andalushotel.com; Sharia al-Kindi; s/d US\$39/48; ☎) It can be hard to choose between the new private hotels, but our favourite is Funduq al-Andalus, which has all the necessary bells and whistles – satellite TV, minibar, air-conditioning – but with decoration that is more stylish than most and service that is attentive.

Corinthia Bab Africa Hotel (☎ 3351990; tripoli@corinthia.com; Souq al-Thulatha; d from US\$290; ☎) A towering temple of glass and elegance, this is Libya's classiest hotel. The rooms are enormous and luxurious, the restaurants of the highest order, and the service and facilities everything you'd expect for the price.

ENTERING MEDINA MOSQUES

None of the mosques in Tripoli's medina have official opening hours, but the custodians of the keys are never far away. A gentle knock on the door should elicit some response if you're prepared to be patient. If no-one appears, ask a nearby shopkeeper who will invariably know where the *miftah* (key) is. Avoid visiting during prayer time, especially Friday prayers around noon. Entry is free, but a tip for the caretaker is appreciated.

EATING & DRINKING

Haj Hmad Restaurant (☎ 0913136367; Sharia Haity; meals from US\$6; ☺ lunch & dinner) Haj Hmad is a great place to enjoy traditional Libyan dishes heavy on internal organs, feet and heads. But there are plenty of nonoffal dishes to choose from (including fish and beans) and it's popular with locals – always a good sign.

Mat'am Obaya (Obaya Seafood Restaurant; ☎ 0925010736; Souq al-Turk 114; meals US\$8 ☺ lunch Sat–Thu) This place is small with no pretensions to luxury, but there's no finer seafood in Libya and all of it's home-cooked. The stuffed calamari is the tastiest restaurant dish you'll find and the *shola* (fish with sauce) is not far behind.

Mat'am ash-Sharq (Mat'am al-Bourai; ☎ 0913157772; Sharia al-Halqa; meals from US\$8; ☺ lunch & dinner) Above one of the liveliest thoroughfares in the medina, this bright, busy restaurant has excellent food. Its speciality is the delicious *rishda* (noodles with chickpeas and onions).

Galaxie Restaurant (☎ 4448764; galaxie_libya@yahoo.com; Sharia 1st September 135; meals US\$11–14; ☺ lunch & dinner) One of the best restaurants in the area, Galaxie is tastefully decorated and does the usual dishes with a touch more imagination than similar places elsewhere. The *jara* (meat stew) is excellent, but needs to be ordered three hours in advance.

Athar Restaurant (☎ 4447001; meals US\$13–16; ☺ lunch & dinner) This excellent place, next to the Arch of Marcus Aurelius, has a wonderful location and the outdoor tables are among the most pleasant in Tripoli. The high-quality food ranges from more traditional couscous or tajine (a lightly spiced lamb dish with a tomato-and-paprika-based sauce) to mixed grills and fish. Visa cards are accepted.

Magha as-Sa'a (☎ 0925032511; Maydan al-Sa'a; ☺ 7am–2am) Opposite the Ottoman clock tower in the medina, this is Tripoli's outstanding traditional teahouse.

For a totally different eating experience, head 5.5km east of the port along the road to Tajura where there's a ramshackle fish market. Choose the fish or other seafood that you want, buy it and then take it to one of the basic restaurants where they'll grill it for you for a small fee (around US\$1.20).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Libyan Arab Airlines (☎ 3331143; www.libyanarabairline.com; Sharia Haity) flies from Tripoli International Airport, 25km south of the city, and **Al-Buraq Air** (☎ 4444811; www.buraqair.com; Sharia Mohammed

Megharief) flies from Metiga Airport, 10km east of Tripoli. They both operate domestic flights to Benghazi (from US\$30). Libyan Arab Airlines also flies to Ghat (US\$44, twice weekly) and Sebha (US\$30, daily).

Long-distances buses and shared taxis for most cities around Libya depart from the area near Tunis Garage at the western end of Sharia al-Rashid or Dahra Bus Station; the latter is 1.5km east of the centre.

GETTING AROUND

A private taxi to/from Tripoli International Airport costs US\$8. Elsewhere in the city, a trip rarely costs more than US\$1.60.

NORTHERN LIBYA

SABRATHA

The ruins of ancient **Sabratha** (☎ 024-622214; admission US\$2.40, compulsory guide US\$40, camera/video US\$4/8; ☺ 8am–6.30pm), 80km west of Tripoli, are among the highlights of any visit to Libya, especially as they are home to one of the finest theatres of antiquity.

Settled by the Phoenicians in the 4th century BC, Sabratha was resettled by the Greeks in the 2nd century BC. In the 1st century AD, the Romans made the city their own.

Highlights of Sabratha include the mosaics and frescoes of the **Roman Museum** (admission US\$2.40; ☺ 8am–6pm Tue–Sun) as well as the elevated **Antonine Temple**, **Judicial Basilica**, Roman **forum**, the **Capitoleum** and the **Temple of Liber Pater**, which dominate the monumental heart of Sabratha. The 6th-century **Basilica of Justinian** is the finest remnant of Byzantine Sabratha, but it is the magnificent 2nd-century Roman **theatre** that will live longest in the memory. The largest in Africa, its three-tiered façade with 108 fluted Corinthian columns is adorned with exquisite carvings of Roman divinities.

Most groups visit Sabratha on a day trip from Tripoli.

LEPTIS MAGNA

Leptis Magna (Lebdah in Arabic; ☎ 031-624256; admission US\$2.40, compulsory guide US\$40, camera/video US\$4/8; ☺ 8am–6.30pm) is one of the best-preserved, most evocative Roman cities in the Mediterranean. It's a testament to extravagance with examples of lavish decoration, grand buildings of monumental stature, indulgent bath complexes and forums for entertainment.

First settled in the 7th century BC, Leptis Magna became Africa's premier Roman city during the reign of Leptis' favourite son, Septimius Severus (r AD 193–211).

The ornately carved **Arch of Septimius Severus** is a grand introduction to the architectural opulence of Leptis, but its grandeur is rivalled by the superb **Hadrianic Baths**, one of the social hubs of the ancient city. Equally splendid are the **Severan Forum**, **Severan Basilica**, the octagonal halls of the **market** and Leptis' **theatre**, one of the oldest stone theatres anywhere in the Roman world. Around 1km east of the city is the evocative **amphitheatre** (admission US\$2.40, camera/video US\$4/8; ☎ 8am–6.30pm Tue–Sun), which once held 16,000 people and overlooks the Roman **circus** where chariot races were held. Close to the site entrance, the **museum** (admission US\$2.40; ☎ 8am–6.30pm Tue–Sun) is outstanding.

Although most people visit Leptis on a day trip from Tripoli, it's possible to camp (US\$4) in car park No 1 under the pine and eucalyptus trees. In the neighbouring town of Al-Khoms, the following accommodation options are all recommended:

Al-Madinah Hotel (☎ 031-620799; al_madinahhotel@yahoo.com; s/d US\$12/16; ☎)

Leptes Hotel (☎ 031-621252; lepdahhotel@yahoo.com; Sharia al-Khoms; s/d from US\$12/20; ☎)

Funduq al-Andalus (☎ 031-626667; Tripoli–Misrata Hwy; s with shared bathroom US\$16, tw/d with private bathroom US\$24/32; ☎)

Inside Leptis, between the ticket office and the museum, is **Mat'am Addiyafa** (☎ 621210; meals US\$11.80; ☎ lunch), with a good atmosphere.

BENGHAZI

☎ 061 / pop 650,629

Libya's second-largest city makes a comfortable base for exploring the ancient cities of eastern Libya. While it may lack the cosmopolitan charm of Tripoli and has few monuments to its ancient past, Benghazi is known for its pleasant climate and friendly people.

Benghazi's **Old Town Hall** runs along the western side of **Freedom Sq.** It's largely derelict, but strong traces of its former elegance remain in its whitewashed Italianate façade. The covered **Souq al-Jreed** stretches for more than a kilometre and, like any African market worth its salt, it offers just about anything you could want and plenty that you don't.

If you end up staying at any of the following places, you'll be well pleased.

Funduq an-Nadi Libya (☎ 3372333; fax 3372334; Sharia Ahmed Rafiq al-Madawi; s/d US\$20/32; ☎) is an excellent place 3km north of the centre. It has comfortable, quiet and spacious rooms with satellite TV.

Built in 2003, **Funduq al-Fadheel** (☎ 9099795; elfadeelhotel@hotmail.com; Sharia el-Shatt; s/d from US\$29/43; ☎) is one of the best hotels in Libya. The pleasant rooms are spacious and well appointed, and come with laundry service. There are two restaurants, a swimming pool, large-screen TVs and an internet café onsite.

One of Benghazi's top hotels, **Funduq Uzu** (☎ 9095160; www.uzuhotel.com; Sharia al-Jezayir; s/d from US\$40/52) has superbly appointed rooms with all the requisite bells and whistles. The buffet breakfasts are among the best in town.

On the northern side of the harbour, **Funduq Tibesti** (☎ 9090017; fax 9098029; Sharia Jamal Abdul Nasser; s/d from US\$59/80) is another classy hotel with a luxurious ambience. Facilities include a patisserie, a health club, three coffee shops and four restaurants. Visa card is accepted.

For a bite to eat you can't go past **Mat'am al-Arabi** (☎ 9094468; Sharia Gulf of Sirt; meals US\$13; ☎ lunch & dinner Sat–Thu, dinner Fri), one of Benghazi's finest restaurants. It has a delightful ambience, with a mosaic floor, tented roof, soft lighting and eminently reasonable price tag.

Benghazi's Bernina Airport handles both international and domestic flights. **Libyan Arab Airlines** (☎ 9092064; www.libyanarabairline.com; Sharia al-Jezayir) and **Al-Buraq Air** (☎ 2234469; www.buraqair.com; Bernina Airport) share four daily flights to Tripoli (from US\$30).

There are daily buses and shared taxis to Tripoli, Sirt, Al-Bayda, Sebha and Tobruk from Al-Funduq Market.

CYRENE

☎ 084

Looking out towards the Mediterranean from its hilltop perch, **Cyrene** (admission US\$2.40, compulsory guide US\$40, camera/video US\$4/8; ☎ 8am–6.30pm) rivals Leptis Magna for the title of Libya's most captivating ancient city.

Founded by Greek settlers from the island of Thera (modern Santorini) in 631 BC, Cyrene was the pre-eminent city of the Greek world in the 4th century BC, renowned for its philosophers and scholars. After the change from Greek to Roman administration in 75 BC, it became an important Roman capital.

The large, open **gymnasium**, originally built by the Greeks in the 2nd century BC and

later converted by the Romans into a forum, is most people's introduction to the city. Nearby, the mosaics of the **House of Hesychius** are remarkable, while the agora – the heart of ancient Cyrene – is littered with stunning monuments such as the **Temple of the Octagonal Bases**, the **Naval Monument**, the unusual **Sanctuary of Demeter & Kore** and the **Capitoleum**. Down the hill from the agora, the **Sanctuary of Apollo** includes the 6th-century-BC **Temple of Apollo** and the adjacent **Temple of Artemis**, which may predate the Apollo temple. The spectacularly situated **theatre** is also fascinating, while the 5th-century-BC **Temple of Zeus**, up the hill from the rest of Cyrene, was once larger than the Parthenon in Athens. Cyrene's **museum** (admission US\$2.40, camera/video US\$4/8; ☎ 8am–6.30pm Tue–Sun), southeast of the Temple of Zeus, has wonderful statues, sculptures and other artefacts that once adorned this extraordinary Graeco-Roman city.

Although many tour groups stay in the nearby town of Al-Bayda, the hills around Cyrene are home to the **Buyut ash-Shabaab** (Youth Hostel; ☎ 637371; camping US\$4, dm Hl members/nonmembers US\$2.40/4) and the **Cyrene Resort** (☎ 0851-64391; s/d US\$28/35; ☎ ☎); the latter has pleasant rooms and an excellent café and restaurant cut into one of the caves.

Also in the hills around Cyrene **Cave Restaurant** (☎ 635206; elbadertours@hotmail.com; meals from US\$12; ☎ lunch), living up to its name, is a friendly, atmospheric place offering tasty food and good views down towards the coast.

APOLLONIA

☎ 084

Another wonderful ancient Greek city, **Apollonia** (admission US\$2.40, compulsory guide US\$40, camera/video US\$4/8; ☎ 8am–7pm Oct–Apr) was the port of Cyrene and came to rival its mother city in significance in the late Roman period. Most of what remains today dates from the Byzantine era when Apollonia was known as the 'city of churches'.

The Apollonia ruins are strung out along a narrow strip of coastline and include the **Western Church**, with its mixture of Roman and Byzantine columns; the 2nd-century **Roman baths and gymnasium**; and the **Byzantine Duke's Palace**, once one of the biggest palaces in Cyrenaica. Some mosaics remain in the **Eastern Church**, while the plunging and picturesque **Greek theatre** stands at the eastern reaches of the site.

In a prime location 50m from the site entrance, **Al-Manara Hotel** (☎ 63035; www.manarahotel.com; s/d US\$35/47; ☎ ☎) is a lovely private hotel with outstanding rooms and a good restaurant (meals US\$12).

TOBRUK

☎ 087 / pop 121,052

Tobruk was the scene of some of the most important WWII battles. Its main (and only) attraction is the **war cemeteries** (admission free; ☎ 9am–5pm Sat–Thu, 2–5pm Fri).

The **Knightsbridge (Acroma) Cemetery**, 20km west of town, is the largest in Tobruk with 3649 graves of Allied soldiers. Between the Knightsbridge Cemetery and Tobruk is the former battlefield dressing station known as the **Australian (Fig Tree) Hospital**. The **Tobruk (Commonwealth) War Cemetery**, 6km south of the harbour, also has an air of simplicity and dignity and contains 2479 graves. More than 300 soldiers are buried in the **French Cemetery**, 8km south of the harbour, while the names of 6026 German soldiers are inscribed in mosaic slabs lining the inside walls of the **German Cemetery**, a forbidding sandstone fort 3.2km south of the harbour.

Funduq al-Masira (☎ 625761; fax 625769; s/d US\$28/35; ☎ ☎) is a concrete eyesore on the southwestern corner of the harbour and also happens to be Tobruk's finest hotel with satellite TV in the comfortable rooms.

SOUTHERN LIBYA

JEBEL NAFUSA

The barren Jebel Nafusa (Western Mountains) protect Libya's northeastern coast from the Sahara, which stretches away deep into the heart of Africa from the mountains' southern slopes. It's a land of rocky escarpments and stone villages clinging to outcrops high above the plains. It's worth exploring as you make your way to Ghadames.

Gharyan sprawls across the top of a plateau and has a number of unusual underground Berber houses. It's famous for its pottery.

Further west, **Qasr al-Haj** is home to a stunning *qasr* (fortified granary) that has stored the local harvests since the 12th century. The main courtyard is breathtaking, with the walls completely surrounded by 114 cavelike rooms. Other stunning *qasrs* are to be found in **Kabaw**, which hosts the **Qasr Festival** in April, and **Nalut**.

GHADAMES

☎ 0484 / pop 16,752

The Unesco World Heritage-listed old city of Ghadames has everything that you imagine a desert oasis to have – abundant palm groves, a wonderfully preserved, labyrinthine old town, and a pace of life largely unchanged for centuries. It's an extraordinary place.

The old city was founded around 800 years ago and was occupied by both the Ottomans and Italians. In recent decades, Libya's old cities, including that of Ghadames, have fallen victim to the revolutionary government's push towards modernisation. In 1982–83 the Libyan government began building a new town beyond the walls and new houses were given to Ghadamis to encourage them to leave the homes of their ancestors. In 1984 there were 6666 people living in the old town; four years later there was just one family left.

Old Ghadames (adult/child US\$2.40/0.80, compulsory guide half/full day US\$32/47, camera/video US\$4/8) is another world of covered alleyways, white-washed houses and extensive palm gardens irrigated by wells. The old city comprised loosely configured concentric areas containing residential and commercial districts and covering around 10 hectares. The city was divided into seven 'streets', each the domain of a different subsection of the Bani Walid and Bani Wazid tribes. Each 'street' was essentially a self-contained town, with a mosque, houses, schools, markets and a small communal square for public events.

The designers of the **traditional houses** of Ghadames made maximum use of vertical space and visiting one is a must while in Libya. Eye-catching with whitewashed walls and brightly painted interiors, all of the houses were connected. The rooftops were the domain of women in the same way that the public laneways below belonged to men. At least three of the old houses have been stunningly restored and are now open to the public: **Dan Do Omer** (☎ 62300; dandoomer731@yahoo.com); **Dan Bero** (ask at Dan Bero Coffee Shop) and **Dan Magrumah**. Talk to your guide about arranging a visit.

In the new part of town, **Ghadames Museum** (☎ 62225; adult/child US\$2.40/0.80, camera/video US\$4/8; ☎ 9am–1.30pm Sat–Thu) is a worthwhile window on old Ghadames.

In October every year, the annual three-day **Ghadames Festival** brings the old city alive in a riot of colour and activity.

Ghadames has a shortage of good accommodation, but there are villas (private homes) that open their doors to travellers all across town (B&B US\$16). Otherwise, Ghadames' best hotels are:

Winzrik Motel (☎ /fax 82485; camping US\$4, s/d US\$24/28; ☎)

Al-Waha Hotel (☎ 62569; fax 62568; s/d US\$24/32; ☎)

Funduq Kasser El-Deawan (☎ 63350; fax 041-634115; s/d US\$24/32; ☎)

The only problem with **Restaurant Awwal** (☎ 62429; meals from US\$9; ☎ lunch & dinner) is that it's so good most of the other restaurants in town have closed. Its chicken and lamb dishes, especially the tajine, are great.

The ultimate eating experience in Ghadames is, however, lunch in one of the traditional houses of the old town. The most frequently prepared meal is the delicious *fit-aat* (lentils, mutton and buckwheat pancakes cooked together in a tasty sauce in a low oven and eaten with the hands from a communal bowl). **Dan Do Omer** (☎ 62300; dandoomer731@yahoo.com) does this to perfection; ask for the owner of the house, At-Tayeb Mohamed Hiba.

IDEHAN UBARI & THE UBARI LAKES

The Idehan Ubari (Ubari Sand Sea) is a dramatic sea of towering sand dunes. There are at least 11 lakes in the area. Although many have dried up and most require longer expeditions, three – pretty **Mavo**, dramatic **Gebraoun** and enchanting **Umm al-Maa** (Mother of Water) – are easily accessible and majestically beautiful at sunset. Swimming in the buoyant waters surrounded by sand dunes and palm trees is one of the great desert experiences.

GHAT & THE JEBEL ACACUS

☎ 0724 / pop 24,347

The ancient trading centre of Ghat is one of the most attractive of the Libyan oasis towns. There's an evocative mud-brick **medina** in the heart of town and a superb setting; a backdrop of stunning sand dunes, the dark ridges of Jebel Acacus to the east and the distant peaks of the Tassili-n-Ajjer (in Algeria) to the west.

The **Jebel Acacus** is an otherworldly landscape of dark basalt stone monoliths rising up from the sands of the central Sahara. This Unesco World Heritage-listed area is home to some wonderful scenery, which features a number of unique natural rock formations enhanced by the ever-shifting sands of the desert, not to

mention prehistoric rock paintings and carvings including elephants, giraffes, wedding ceremonies and dancing human figures.

The **Acacus Festival** (December to January) features a spectacular sunset concert amid the cathedral-like Jebel Acacus, with Tuareg dancing and re-enactments of traditional ceremonies in the medina to bring in the New Year.

WAW AL-NAMUS

The extraordinary volcanic crater of Waw al-Namus is a weird and wonderful place, and one of the most remote destinations in the world, 300km southeast of where the paved road ends at Tmissah. The black-and-white volcanic sand is stunning, as are the three palm-fringed lakes in which the water is red, green and blue. The crater is 7km in circumference and the summit of the rocky mountain in the centre affords stunning views. Be sure to use the existing tracks down into the crater to avoid scarring the landscape for others. Visiting here is a major undertaking and involves a two-day round trip in reliable, well-equipped vehicles. A permit is officially needed to visit Waw al-Namus, but this should be handled by your tour company and the price included in the overall cost of your tour.

LIBYA DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Libya has an extensive network of *buyut ash-shabaab* (youth hostels), which are pretty basic but dirt-cheap and fine for a night. As for camping, sleeping on the desert sand under a canopy of stars is free and unrivalled in beauty. *Funduq* (government-run hotels) are often well situated and possess rooms of a reasonable standard, but service is often dysfunctional. The crop of new private hotels is cheaper, friendlier and much better maintained. Although the choice of hotel is generally a decision for the tour company, if you're armed with good information (such as this guide!), most tour companies are willing to accede to specific requests. Bear in mind, however, that choosing some hotels may increase the cost of your visit from the company's quoted prices.

ACTIVITIES

Desert safaris by 4WD (and occasionally camel) enable you to experience some of the finest scenery the Sahara has to offer. All

PRACTICALITIES

- International newspapers and magazines are not available in Libya.
- Radio coverage in Libya includes the BBC World Service (15.070MHz and 12.095MHz) and other European radio on short wave.
- International satellite TV channels are available in most hotels.
- Libya has the PAL (B) video system, as in Western Europe.
- Libya's electricity system caters for 220V to 240V AC, 50Hz; plugs are of the European-style two-pin type.
- Libya uses the metric system for weights and measures.

Libyan tour companies (p141) can arrange such expeditions lasting from two days up to deep desert expeditions of two weeks.

BUSINESS HOURS

Banks 9am to 1pm Sunday to Tuesday and Thursday, 8am to 12.30pm and 3.30pm to 4.30pm or 5.30pm Wednesday & Saturday

Government offices 7am to 2pm Saturday to Thursday April to September, 8am to 3pm Saturday to Thursday October to March

Internet cafés 9am to 1am Saturday to Thursday and 3pm to 1am Friday

Restaurants 12.30pm to 3pm and 6pm to 10pm Saturday to Thursday, 6pm to 10pm Friday

Shops 10am to 2pm and 5pm to 8pm Saturday to Thursday

CUSTOMS

Libyan customs checks on arrival are pretty cursory although bags are X-rayed. Don't even think of trying to bring alcohol into the country. If you're bringing your own car into the country (see p141), expect an hour or two of inspections at the border. Customs inspections upon departure tend to be slightly more rigorous; they're especially concerned about antiquities and fragments from the Saharan rock art of southern Libya.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Libya is a very safe country in which to travel and Libyans are generally a hospitable and friendly bunch. Police checkpoints can be tiresome and slow your journey, but you'll rarely

be asked to show identification. Don't point your camera at restricted sites (ie government buildings or police stations). Driving in Libya can be hazardous, with the major danger being people driving at high speed.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Libyan Embassies & Consulates

Libyan embassies abroad are known as Libyan People's Bureaus.

Algeria (☎ 92 15 02; 15 Chemin Cheikh Bachir el-Ibrahimi, El-Biar, Algiers)

Australia (☎ 02-6290 7900; 50 Culgoa Circuit, O'Malley, ACT 2606)

Canada (☎ 0613-230 0919; Suite 1000, 81 Metcalfe St, Ottawa, Ont K1P6K7)

Chad (☎ 519289; Rue de Mazieres, N'Djaména)

Egypt (☎ 02-735 1269; fax 02-735 0072; 7 Sharia el-Saleh Ayoub, Zamalek)

France (☎ 01 40 67 75 75; 3 Villa Copernic, 75116, Paris)

Germany (☎ 030-20 05 96 0; Schützenstrasse 15-17, 10117 Berlin)

Italy Milan (☎ 02-86 46 42 85; Via Barracchini 7, Milan 02); Rome (☎ 06-86 32 09 51; Via Nomentana 365, Rome 00 162)

Netherlands (☎ 020-355 8886; Parkweg 15, 1285 GH, The Hague)

Sudan (☎ 83222085; Mashtel St, Riyadh, Khartoum)

Tunisia (☎ 01-780 866; 48 Bis Rue due 1er Juin, Tunis 01)

UK (☎ 020-7589 6120; 61-62 Ennismore Gardens, London SW7 1NH)

US (☎ 212-752 5775; lbyun@undp.org; 309 East 48th St, New York, NY 10017)

Embassies & Consulates in Libya

Countries with diplomatic representation in Tripoli (Map p132) include:

Algeria (☎ 021-4440025; Sharia Kairouan)

Belgium (☎ 021-3350115; Dhat al-Ahmat Tower 4, Level 5)

France (☎ 021-4774891; Sharia Beni al-Amar, Hay Andalus)

Germany (☎ 021-3330554; Sharia Hassan al-Mashai)

Italy (☎ 021-3334131; italconstrip@esteri.it; 1 Sharia Uaharan)

Netherlands (☎ 021-4441549; 20 Sharia Galal Bayar)

UK (☎ 021-3351422; Burj al-Fateh, Level 24)

US (c/o US Interests Section, Belgian Embassy)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Qasr Festival (p136) Honours the Berber traditions of the Jebel Nafusa and centres on Kabaw's evocative *qasr*. Held in April.

Ghadames Festival (p137) Held each October in the old city with celebrations of traditional culture and weddings.

Acacus Festival (p137) Held in Ghat during December and January. Celebrates the town's Tuareg heritage and includes concerts in the mountains.

HOLIDAYS

For a full list of religious holidays that are celebrated in Libya, see p1106. The main national holidays include the following:

Declaration of the People's Authority Day 2 March

British Evacuation Day 28 March

US Evacuation Day 11 June

Revolution Day 1 September

Day of Mourning 26 October

INTERNET ACCESS

Libya has joined the internet revolution and internet cafés are present in almost every small town – look for the blue Internet Explorer sign on the window. Connections can be slow, and costs range from US\$0.60 per hour in Tripoli to US\$1.20 per hour in remote places.

MAPS

For desert expeditions in remote areas, the most reliable map is Michelin's Map No 953, *Africa North and West* (1:4,000,000). The best maps available in Libya include Malt International's *Map of the Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya* (1:3,500,000) and Cartographia's *Libya* (1:2,000,000), which would be the map of choice did it not omit the Jebel Acacus and Waw al-Namus.

MONEY

The unit of currency is the Libyan dinar. For changing money, the bank and black-market exchange rates are all but identical. Large-denomination euros, US dollars or British pounds are preferred. No banks change travellers cheques – cash is king in Libya.

It's now possible to obtain a cash advance on your Visa card at the Masraf al-Tijara Watanmiya (Bank of Commerce & Development) branches in Tripoli and Benghazi.

POST

Almost every town has a post office; they're easily recognisable by the tall telecommunications mast rising above the centre of town. It costs US\$0.25/0.40 to send a postcard/letter to most places, including Europe and Australia.

TELEPHONE

Libya's telephone country code if you're dialling from outside Libya is 218. To make an

international call from inside Libya, dial 00 and then the number. Area codes (listed beneath each destination heading) are required as a prefix to numbers listed throughout this chapter if you're calling long distance. Numbers beginning with 091 or 092 are Libyan mobile numbers.

Calls within Libya invariably receive instant connections and are quite cheap (around US\$0.20). The cheapest international phone calls are made in internet cafés; most cafés sell 8LD (US\$6.30) cards and can help you connect. For 8LD, you will have 210/145/152 minutes to the UK/USA/Italy.

You're unlikely to get coverage for your mobile phone in Libya – check with your company at home before travelling.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Libya's Tourism Ministry operates as an overseer of the tourism industry and tour companies rather than sources of practical information. Your tour company should be able to provide you with all the information you need.

VISAS

To obtain a Libyan visa, you'll need an invitation from a Libyan tour company. The tour company will then send you a visa number. Make sure you have an Arabic-language confirmation to smooth the process with airlines, the embassy or immigration officials. You can collect your visa either from the Libyan embassy in your home country or at your entry point to Libya, but specify which you prefer when making contact with the tour company. The process generally takes two weeks, but allowing for a month is safer. Visas are valid for 30 days from the date of entry. For a list of Libyan tour operators, see opposite.

Visas for Onward Travel

Visas to Tunisia and Egypt are available at the border crossings, while visas to Chad, Sudan, Niger and Algeria are not available from the embassies of these respective countries in Tripoli.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

In general, Libya is one of the easiest countries in North Africa for women to travel in, largely because of Libyan government policies in relation to women that have contributed to a less-misunderstood view of Western women

than in some other countries of the region. As a result, most female travellers have reported being treated with respect, with few incidents of unpleasant behaviour.

TRANSPORT IN LIBYA

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

The vast majority of international flights into Libya arrives at Tripoli International Airport, Benghazi's Bernina Airport. A small number of flights also use Tripoli's Metiga Airport and Sebha's airport.

Many airlines serve Tripoli, including the following:

Afriqiyah Airways (☎ 021-3333647; www.afriqiyah.aero)

Air Malta (☎ 021-3350579; www.airmalta.com)

Alitalia (☎ 021-3350298; www.alitalia.com)

Austrian Airlines (☎ 021-3350242; www.aau.com)

British Airways (☎ 021-3351281; www.britishairways.com)

Emirates (☎ 021-3350597; www.emirates.com)

KLM Royal Dutch Airlines (☎ 021-3350018; www.klm.com)

Lufthansa (☎ 021-3350375; www.lufthansa.com)

Point-Afrique (www.point-afrique.com)

Royal Jordanian (☎ 021-4442453; www.rja.com.jo)

Swiss International Airlines (☎ 021-3350022; www.swiss.com)

Syrianair (☎ 021-4446716; www.syriaair.com)

Tunis Air (☎ 021-3336303; www.tunisair.com)

Turkish Airlines (☎ 021-3351252; www.turkishairlines.com)

Land

Libya's borders with Algeria, Chad, Niger and Sudan were not open to travellers at the time of writing. Niger's border does open from time to time depending on the political winds; check the situation in Tripoli before setting out as it's a long road back to anywhere if it's closed.

EGYPT

The Libya-Egypt border, 139km east of Tobruk at Amsaad and 12km west of Sallum in Egypt, is remote, chaotic and, in summer, perishingly hot; bring your own water. Foreign travellers are often, embarrassingly, shepherded to the front of the queue. We've never heard of anyone turning down such an offer as a matter of principle.

Long-distance buses run from Benghazi to Cairo (24 hours). On the Egyptian side of the border, shared taxis go from Sallum and service taxis travel from Marsa Matruh to the Libyan border, where your Libyan tour operator will meet you by prior arrangement.

TUNISIA

To get to Libya many travellers fly to Tunisia (for which there are numerous cheap flights) and then cross the Tunisia–Libya border by land at Ras Adjir. There are numerous buses and shared taxis between Tripoli and Tunis (10 to 12 hours), although most travellers take a Tunisian shared taxi from Sfax or Ben Guerane as far as the border, where their Libyan tour company will meet them and arrange onward travel.

GETTING AROUND

In this era of organised tours, getting around Libya couldn't be easier because all transport within the country will be organised by your tour company.

Air

Libya's domestic airline network is expanding rapidly with flights connecting Tripoli to Benghazi, Ghat, Houn, Lebreq (near Al-Bayda) and Sebha. There are also occasional flights to Ghadames, with more regular flights planned.

The two airlines that fly domestically in Libya are **Al-Buraq Air** (☎ 021-4444811; www.buraqair.com) and **Libyan Arab Airlines** (☎ 021-3616738; www.libyanarabairline.com).

Car & Motorcycle

If you have your own vehicle, especially a 4WD, there are few limits on where you can go – the Tibesti region in the far southeast of the country is one area that is off-limits to travellers. You must be accompanied by at least one representative of the Libyan tour company who arranged your visa and who remains responsible for you for the duration of your stay. For information on customs inspections when bringing your own car into the country, see p138.

Driving is on the right-hand side of the road, and Libyans generally drive as fast as they think they can get away with. For the record, all cars (including 4WDs) must stay on or below 100km/h on highways and 50km/h inside towns.

NO ANSWER, TRY AGAIN

Libya has numerous professionally run tour companies, although all of them suffer from an occasional inability to answer emails promptly. In fact, many don't answer at all. The actual visa process takes only a couple of weeks, but you're advised to start contacting tour companies long before that to take into account the incomprehensible periods of silence from Tripoli. This problem particularly afflicts lone travellers, but is something of an established Libyan business practice in all fields. Be persistent by following up with phone calls and, as a last resort, threaten to write to us if visa deadlines are approaching.

Libyan roads are maintained in excellent condition and petrol is cheap; you'll fill your tank for around US\$4. No matter how many times you've been waved through a checkpoint, never assume that you will be. Always slow down or stop until you get the wave from your friendly machine-gun-toting soldier.

Tours

The following companies are among those that we either recommend or have had recommended to us by travellers. All are based in Tripoli unless stated otherwise.

Al-Muheet Tours (☎ in Benghazi 061-9082084; www.almuheettours.net) The owner, Samy al-Ghibani, has a reputation for running an efficient and flexible company. It's Benghazi-based.

Destination Libye (☎ in Tripoli 021-4779854; www.dlibye.com) Specialises in French-language tours.

Robban Tourism Services (☎ 021-4441530; www.robban-tourism.com) Outstanding and professional small company with flexible itineraries and good guides; Hussein Founi should be your first port of call.

Sahara Link Travel (☎ 021-3343209; saharalink@hotmail.com)

Shati Zuara Travel & Tourism (☎ in Zuara 091315 8229; www.shati-zuara.de in German) Very good Libyan company with its main base in Germany.

Sukra Travel & Tourism (☎ 021-3340604; www.sukra-travel.com)

Taknes Co (☎ 021-3350526; fax 021-3350525) The owner is the helpful Ali Shebli.

Wings Travel & Tours (☎ 021-3331855; www.wings-tours.com)

Winzrik Tourism Services (☎ 021-3611123; www.winzrik.com) Libya's largest and longest-standing tour company.

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